*Braudel's Identity of France**

Cheng-chung Lai

National Tsing Hua University, Taiwan

"There is, as we shall see, much in this book which is redundant, irrelevant, cryptic, strongly biased, paradoxical, or otherwise unhelpful or even harmful to understanding. When all this is set aside, there still remains enough to constitute, by a wide margin, the most constructive, the most original, the most learned, and the most brilliant contribution to the history of the analytical phases of our discipline which has ever been made." — Jacob Viner (1954, *American Economic Review*, 44:894-5).

1. Setting

The opening excerpt is from the first page of Viner's review of Joseph Schumpeter's *History of Economic Analysis* (1954, Oxford UP). That Schumpeter is well-known in social sciences needs no introduction. Although Viner's work is less famous, the economics community is indebted to him for his 'envelope' theorem, his research in microeconomic theory and international trade, and his writings on the history of economic

*Fernand Braudel: *Identité de la France*, vol. 1: *Espace et histoire*, vol. 2: *Les hommes et les choses*, Paris: Les Editions Arthaud, 1986. Pocket edition: Editions Flammarion; collection Champs: Nos. 220-222 (1990). Translated by Siân Reynolds: *The Identity of France*, vol. 1: *History and Environment* (432 pages, 1988), vol. 2: *People and Production* (781 pages, 1990), New York: Harper & Row.

thought. In short, Viner combined a brilliant mind such that, while most readers were perplexed by Schumpeter's massive volume, Viner was able to reveal Schumpeter's ingenuity.

In this essay Viner's two main ideas as presented above are used to express my opinions about Brandel's *Identity of France*. It is proposed that the first idea of Viner's judgment ("much in this book which is redundant, irrelevant, cryptic, strongly biased, paradoxical, or otherwise unhelpful or even harmful to understanding") fits more or less to Braudel's *Identity*, and that the second idea ("there still remains enough to constitute, by a wide margin, the most constructive, the most original, the most learned, and the most brilliant contribution to the history of the analytical phases of our discipline which has ever been made") is unsuitable.

Section 2 analyzes the framework of the two volumes, not on the individual chapters but on each part (containing several chapters) *en bloc*: exploring its key concepts, design, the aspects treated and the basic characteristics of the work. Section 3 investigates some less obvious facets of the book. Section 4 accounts some positive aspects and my overall evaluation of the work. For page notations, I:123 indicates page 123 of volume one, and II:321 for pages 321 of volume two (English version).

2. Framework

2.1 Novelty. Braudel mentions many classic and modern works on the history of France, explaining why he is unsatisfied with their approaches. His major criticism is that most authors write only of the modern or contemporary history of France, and thus arbitrarily split France's history. Braudel proposed to address the history of France by using his notion of the *longue durée* (LD) to write a new history thus "opening up longer perspectives and freeing us from the endless recital of events" (I:17), because "for those of us beyond childhood, another kind of history, one that is attentive to longer time-scales, enables us to distinguish the extraordinary accumulations and amalgams, the surprising repetitions of the human past, to perceive the huge responsibilities of a multisecular history, that prodigious mass that bears within it a living but often

unconscious heritage, discoverable only by that deeper-probing history, much as psychoanalysis in the early twentieth century revealed the depths of the subconscious. ... But to attempt such things, one needs the raw materials: a plentiful record of lived time. We have no choice but to work with *la longue durée*" (I:18-9). This is a repeated Braudelian manifesto since the 1950s.

However, despite the tremendous appeal of Braudel's LD idea, a careful investigation of these two volumes reveals major flaws in his attempt to demonstrate its validity. Braudel develops a long perspective investigation in the first three chapters of volume II: the first two chapters on the demography of France from prehistory to the Xth century (using 126 pages), and on the population of the X-XVth centuries in Chapter 3 (36 pages). However, in all the rest of the chapters in both volumes, more than 90% of pages are on the post-XVIth century period. The reason is quite simple: documents and research from the XVIth century are relatively abundant, and his specialty is between XV-XVIIIth centuries (as we can see his *The Mediterranean* was around the XVIth century and *Civilization & Capitalism* spanning the XV-XVIIIth centuries). This is supported by the tables and figures: over 85% are covering post-XVIth century period. My reading finds no real LD product from which to assess the validity of Braudel's promising project.

Quite the contrary, the reader is left with a vivid impression after reading this work that it is largely a portrayal of the people, things, and events, i.e. essentially another kind of event history, full of details and trivial. Braudel was not only fond of events but also expressed a keen interest in the details of daily life (examples are the details on Metz and Toulon in Chapter 10 of volume I). It is difficult to see a connection between long passages of this kind with the LD perspective. Their topical structure is too unpredictable to give us an LD perspective.

Braudel criticizes other works on the history of France for their one-dimensional perspective, either from military or diplomatic or dynastic change point of view. He advocated the use of tools offered "by the various social sciences — geography, political economy, demography, politics, anthropology, ethnology, social psychology, cultural studies, sociology. History has allowed light to be shed on to it from all sides, and has

accepted a multitude of newly-formulated questions. ... we are all under an obligation to speak in terms of the global, of 'historical totalization', to reaffirm that 'total history [is] the only true history, ...'' (I:17).

This total history ambition remains unproved. The open-ended advocacy of the use of tools from different disciplines leaves the task undefined. It should be stressed that the way Braudel uses these three disciplines (geography, demography and political economy) in the first two volumes is superficial, consisting essentially of references to terminology rather than applications of chosen key concepts from various disciplines. Braudel offers no new concepts and suffers from a misuse of old ideas (LD and total history) that Braudel readers are familiar with for decades.

2.2 Structure. Turning to the problem of overall design. Part I of volume one (Chapters 1-3) is a historical account of France's diversity in geography, language, customs etc.; Part II (Chapters 4-6) discusses the three patterns of settlement: villages, bourgs and *villes* (towns and cities); Part III (Chapters 7-10) discusses France's transportation, frontiers, i.e. the role of geography in the shaping of France. Overall, this volume is a geo-history of France.

The second volume contains four parts treating three major topics. Part I (Chapters 1-2) on France's population from prehistory to the Xth century; Part II (Chapters 3-5) on population and demographic problems of the Xth century up to 1980s; Part III (Chapters 6-10) on the infrastructure of France's economy: the peasant economy, until the XXth century; Part IV (Chapters 11-15) on the superstructure of the economy: circulation, industry, commerce, money, banking, and state finance. Finally, conclusions to these two volumes are drawn (II:669-79).

The sections devoted to *villes* (town and cities) are unreasonably long. This is the topic of Chapter 6 in volume I (I:179-262), and again the title of Chapter 11 in volume II (II:415-59); these two chapters contain 128 pages, or 8.23% of both volumes. It does not seem appropriate that this topic deserves such a high proportion of the history of France. A possible reason for this is the greater abundance of documents than other topics. It is difficult to see the rationale for placing this topic as

the first chapter in Part IV of volume II whose subject is the superstructure of the French economy. Chapter 11 (of volume II) is also rather loosely structured with no main focus or deep analysis. For instance, II:415-9 discusses the rate of urbanization, II:419-21 the growing role of towns, II:421-3 the relationship between town and crown, II:423-5 on the choice of site. Thus, within 17 pages five large topics are presented without significant structural depth or analysis which would seen a necessary component of any LD perspective or 'total history' analysis. Examples of this kind are abundant and flaw Braudel's claims.

A second indication of inadequate structural definition is that under each chapter there are only sections, i.e. no sub-sections are found; the consequence is that the connections between sections are not always evident. For instance, the same Chapter 11 of volume II on Towns (II:415) discusses the rate of urbanization, but after turning to other topics we are returned to "The rate of urbanization" once more (II:444-5).

A third example is in Chapter 15 of volume II: "At the pinnacle of the hierarchy: capitalism". The main materials covered in this chapter are France's monetary and banking system, state finance and taxation. Money and banking are related to capitalists, but not necessarily with capitalism because under capitalism the relations are much more complicated including the process of production, financing (at the firm level), marketing, etc. Another inappropriateness in this chapter is that Braudel presents "The role of the bill of exchange" and "Did the bill of exchange create 'intra-European links?' in II:620-33, but fails to discuss any role of France. Unlike her European neighbours Italy, Spain, Holland and Britain, France before the XIXth century was not deeply involved in "capitalism activities"; France was, as he said in volume I, an inland-looking country, retarded in sea power. So France's capitalism is only a recent growth in relation to the general course of her history.

3. Perplexities

If we follow the principle of Occam's razor *(essentia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem)*, more than one-third of the writing could be deleted without damage to Braudel's central messages: there are

too many scattered facts supporting too few arguments, hypotheses and causalities. The following two examples will be sufficient to illustrate this point. Chapter 6 of volume I contains 85 pages on towns (I:179-264), of which Rouen occupies 25 pages (I:204-229). If this middle-size town requires such lengthy discussion we might speculate that it has outstanding significance (in the same chapter only eight pages (I:251-9) are allocated to Paris). However, the pages on Rouen are largely factual without LD or total history analysis. Two-thirds of these pages could be eliminated without changing the reader's understanding. A similar pattern occurs in Chapter 10 of volume I on Toulon, "the only French naval base in the Mediterranean" (I:351). The chapter is a historical catalogue of names, dates, events, war, as Braudel confessed: "This time I have not avoided exciting events, ..." (I:351). This chapter of events is incompatible with LD perspective.

A striking feature of this book is that the author does not focus at all on problem-solving. Given his general style in summarizing documents in offering his opinions, we rarely (if at all) see that he has investigated topics in depth. The structurally predictable result is that unanswered questions are raised again and again in the end of sections or chapters. For example, "Revolts before 1680" (II:387-9) is the issue of revolts "when popular uprisings were widespread in response to the excess of the tax-collectors" and "between 450 and 500 'sparks of revolt' in Aquitaine alone, between 1590 and 1715" (II:387-8). This is a highly relevant topic because these revolts occurred repeatedly, forming a noteworthy social structure problem. In the final paragraph Braudel writes: "Such geographical concentration [in Aquitaine] requires an explanation: but are we in a position to provide one?" (II:389). Braudel then offers four obvious hints for further research and ended the topic. The subject of revolts is not easy to handle within a limited context, but many other easier questions that Braudel asks in the closing paragraphs might have been resolved within the format he chose, but these were left to the reader as he continued with his easy summaries.

"As detached an 'observer' as possible, the historian must take what might be termed a personal vow of silence". This is what Braudel declares in the first page of the Introduction (I:15). But we see on many occasions in which he offers his personal testimony that he contradicts this rule.

Examples can be found in the following pages, I:64, 120, 123, 126, 143, 260, 282; II:361, 366, 496, 529, 644, 675-7. For instance, in II:496 Braudel says: "But it is not very long ago that I was myself marvelling to find that São Paulo in Brazil was linked to Paris by direct dialling: I hastened to call up an old friend whom I had first met in 1936, when Brazil was still over two weeks from Europe *by boat*!" Among the formal books on the history of France, this one could be the most casual in style.

Braudel's discussion of Hoffmann theory of industrial growth (II:535-7) is unclear and the evidence used is inappropriate.

"Hoffmann's theory, formulated with reference to Britain after the industrial revolution, [but which] could safely be applied to France in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Formulated as a general proposition, it can easily be extended beyond its already generous chronological limits. Rather than a theory, it is a rule, indeed for once I will hazard to say a law. For Walter Hoffmann, *any* industry, whatever its location and purpose (and I would add whatever its period) follows a parabolic curve from its inception, with a comparatively rapid rise, a ceiling reached over time, and a downward phase that may be vertical. We need not dwell on the examples he cites, which prove the point. In another book, I tried out 'Hoffmann's law' on a few quantifiable examples, alas only too rare, from the sixteenth century. But one thing stands out: the days of any industry are numbered, even if its beginnings are spectacular, even if at the height of its powers it seems to be in perfect health. All industrial activity will sooner or later obey this predestined curve, what ever the ups and downs of fortune on the way" (II:535).

As presented, Braudel argues that Hoffmann's main point is that any industry, regardless of time, location and their nature, obeys a parabolic curve that Hoffmann described, the only differences are that each curve may have different slope and length. But for economic historians this general statement can hardly be called a theory. In *Civilization & Capitalism* II:346 we find a better explanation as follows:

"any given industry (and the exceptions merely prove the rule) will pass through three stages: expansion, plateau, decline, or to be more

precise: '(i) the stage of industrial expansion which is characterized by a rising rate of growth of output; (ii) the stage of industrial development, when the rate of growth is declining; and (iii) the stage ... when there is an absolute decline of output'".

This renders Hoffmann thesis clear. Let us examine how Braudel tested this theory with evidence from France. In Figure 70 (II:537) is a reproduction of Markovitch's *L'Industrie française de 1789 à 1964* with three curves: "dynamic new industries", "progressive older industries" and "declining old industries", where the vertical axis represents "millions of francs 1905-13". However, the Hoffmann thesis is based on individual industry statistics and Markovitch's evidence represents an aggregation (e.g. grouping all "dynamic new industries" together). In so doing we lose the ability to know which individual industry's parabolic line is different from other industries? Figure 70 is simply inappropriate as a test of Hoffmann's theory.

4. Contributions

Two related examples may reveal the qualities of Braudel's work: the first example is instructive because of its rich information, the second example has no evidence to support but it is instructive because of its thought-provoking hints.

II:288-94 presents summary of a 1817 *cadastre* (register, originally for tax purposes, of land distribution and ownership). "It provides, for each of the 86 *départements* France then contained, the income per hectare for the various sectors of production (arable land, vineyard, grassland and woodland). A fifth figure gives the income in francs of the average hectare in the *département.*" This is a nation-wide census which allows inter-regional comparison. For instance, in the poorest *département* (the Basses-Alpes), the average income per hectare for ploughland was 13 francs, vineyard (30), grassland (57), woodland (2) and the overall average income per hectare (6.38). For the richest *département* (the Seine), the first four figures were: 100, 112, 84, 108, while the fifth overall average was unavailable.

Braudel dug this document out from the Archives Nationales (A.N., F^{20} 560), explained its background and significance, then transformed its

major results into Figure 35 (II:291-3). The drawer of this figure is skillful and presents this complicated information in clear and elegant maps.

This informative document and the inspiring nature of Figure 35 remind us that if the amount of available land does not significantly change, and there is no major breakthrough in agricultural production, two factors might affect the above five statistics. Firstly, the rise or fall of population will change population density (i.e. man/land ratio), which will lead to different food pressures. For example, when population density increases and food is in short supply, then grassland, vineyards, and even woodland will be transformed into ploughland. On the other hand, when there is no pressure on food supplies, ploughland will be shifted to more profitable activities such as vineyards or grassland to produce higher-value wine and meat. Secondly, other things being equal, when the business cycle is in its upswing phase, general prices also rise, the demand for good wine and meat will be increased; and vice-versa.

In other words, population density and the business cycle will affect the allocation of land for different purposes. Braudel did not offer this mechanism, but it reveals the real idea behind what Braudel is discussing in II:247-8, 257-8, namely the competition for land between man and animals:

"sometimes it was a choice between people and animals, between wheat and pasture. Often what man needed for food animals needed too — some foodstuff were interchangeable. ... Sir Thomas More (1478-1535) noted in his *Utopia* that domestic sheep, since pastures were being extended at the expense of wheat fields, 'eat up and swallow downe the very men them selves', depriving them of food and even work ... In France, Cantillon (1680-1734) tackled the same question: 'The more horses a state maintains, the less subsistence there will be for the inhabitants'; 'it is either horses or men'. ... in the whole of Basse-Normandie much later, by about 1780-1820, as more fields were set to grass, the cow too became an innocent enemy of man" (II:248-9).

Braudel offered no evidence to test the validity of this man/animal competition for land hypothesis, nor did he offer evidence to demonstrate the presence of this competition for land among grain, wine, meat, wood (mainly for construction and fuel) in France. Instead, in Figure 31 (II:259)

he offered four curves showing statistics of (1) rural population, (2) cattle (including oxen), (3) pigs, and (4) horses for nearly two hundred years (1790-1980). This is an informative figure in itself but unfortunately it does not provide useful information to test the above hypotheses (the man/animal competition for land thesis, and the land allocation for competitive sectors of agricultural production thesis). We may conjecture that these kinds of statistics could be in existence for the period of the XVIII-XXth centuries and leave this interesting topic to French economic historians.

We are obliged to Braudel for offering such rich and detailed bibliographical references in the massive notes in the end of the two volumes. These references demonstrate that Braudel prepared for writing 'total history' with wide information on geography, political economy, demography, linguistics, folklore, military studies, politics, etc., much of it acquired from the Archives Nationales. Braudel's passion for archives, not only for their useful information, but also as the source of inspiration and imagination is clearly evident in his work. In II:724 note 209 he mentions the Moscow State Archives, showing that his passion for archives extended beyond the borders of France. Readers may find some elegant passages and scattered insights: some related page numbers are offered: I:31, 52, 119, 125, 183; II:237, 317.

Some typescripts of Volume III of *Identity of France* (*État, Culture, Société*) remained unpublished in the 1980s, they are now collected in pp. 417-506 of *Les ambitions de l'histoire* (1997) which is volume II of *Les écrits de Fernand Braudel* (3 volumes), Paris: Editions de Fallois (1996-2000). Although a brief table of contents is listed on p. 419, this volume III remained largely incomplete, which makes evaluation premature.